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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 001515

SIPDIS
AMEMBASSY ASTANA PASS TO USOFFICE ALMATY
AMEMBASSY BELGRADE PASS TO AMEMBASSY PODGORICA
AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG

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SUBJECT: Ambassador's Sept 23 Meeting with Uzbek FM Norov

CLASSIFIED BY: Nicholas Berliner, Pol-Econ Chief; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a meeting with the Ambassador, Uzbek Foreign Minister Norov expressed appreciation for the Eid message from the Secretary and said he looked forward to meetings on the margins of the UNGA next week. Commenting on the draft agenda for the Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABC), he said that Uzbekistan was also preparing a draft largely similar to the U.S. one, but remarked that we would have to discuss further what we hope to achieve in the "human dimension." This gave way to a discussion of Uzbek social values and the gradual, evolutionary model that the GOU has adopted in both the economic and civil realms. On the subject of the future of exchange programs, Norov said that the GOU was in favor of exchanges at the university level that further the technological and economic development of the country. On Afghanistan, Norov again made the case for a revival of the 6 plus 3 concept, claiming that Karzai's "re-election" would be a victory only for those such as Iran that want to see the U.S. fail. End Summary.

Secretary's Message and Meetings at UNGA

¶2. (C) Norov said that he was looking forward to his trip to New York and meetings there with U.S. officials. He said that he realized that any meeting with the Secretary would be brief, but very important nonetheless for its symbolic value. The Ambassador handed him a copy of the Secretary's Eid message, which he read and expressed his appreciation for.

Annual Bilateral Consultations

¶3. (C) The Ambassador also shared the draft agenda for the ABC. Reading through it in the meeting, Norov said that the Uzbek side was preparing its own proposal that tracked with ours in many respects. He focused at length on the "human dimension" portion and noted that we would have to discuss these issues further to determine what it is that the U.S. side wants from Uzbekistan. Remarking on the question of the accreditation of journalists and NGOs, Norov said that the only problem in this area was that many journalists and NGO representatives were not prepared to follow Uzbek law and Uzbek law is not going to change. He said that the U.S. wants Uzbekistan to move quickly in these areas, but that Uzbekistan is "not going to hurry" and is going to develop at its own pace in a way that preserves social harmony. The ABC must develop on the basis of "mutual interests," he said, such as

dealing with Russian aggression. Uzbekistan has problems, but the U.S. must understand the situation and refrain from criticism. After all, he continued, the U.S. has a lot of problems too, but Uzbekistan does not take it upon itself to point these out.

Child Labor

14. (C) Not for the first time, Norov expounded at length on misperceptions about Uzbekistan. He said that the well being of children was the top priority of every Uzbek family and the state and that Uzbekistan had been unfairly singled out on the issue of child labor in the cotton sector simply as a means of exerting pressure. He noted that the U.S. is looking at this from the vantage point of a developed society that has already gone through the stage where Uzbekistan is today. Pointing out that he himself picked cotton as a child and went on to become Foreign Minister, he said it was difficult to buy the argument that this work was harmful to children or putting them at a disadvantage. He then made reference to a study of child labor in Kyrgyzstan that reportedly found 600,000 children working in dangerous conditions - of a total population of 1.5 million children in the country. This, according to Norov, was further evidence of the fact that Uzbekistan had been singled out unfairly and was the reason for President Karimov's refusal to accept an ILO survey of child labor in the cotton sector in Uzbekistan.

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Reflections on a Bad Day in Brussels

15. (C) Norov had harsh words for the Europeans. He referred to his tendentious meeting in Brussels last week with the EU in which the Europeans criticized Uzbekistan's human rights record and the fact that the wearing of the hijab is banned in schools. Norov expressed indignation that the French or anyone else could criticize Uzbekistan for this when they themselves are banning the wearing of the hijab. He criticized what he views as a good deal of Islamophobia in Europe, noting a reference made by one of his interlocutors to "Islamic terrorism," equating Islam and terrorism. He pointed out that President Obama has noted the importance of making a distinction between the two.

Uzbeks Are the Happiest People in Central Asia

16. (C) Norov continued on a now familiar theme here of respect for Uzbekistan's cultural values. Society needs to develop slowly and the state should play a leading role in helping to guide this change. He said that the Government had taken a gradualist approach to change since independence in 1991 and that socially and economically this has paid dividends. He noted that Uzbekistan has a high degree of social harmony, despite its diverse ethnic mix, which was important to maintain. Then, as a way of illustrating the point, he compared Uzbekistan's suicide rate with that of Kazakhstan. According to Norov, Uzbekistan, despite having a population four times greater than Kazakhstan's, had only 1,200 suicides in 2008, compared to 3,600 in Kazakhstan. He pointed to this as an indication of the social peace and tight family structures that characterize Uzbek society and the necessity of combining material and spiritual wealth.

Exchanges

17. (C) The Ambassador raised the question of the future of USG

student exchange programs, following a recent MFA complaint that the Embassy was not being transparent about these programs. Norov said that the GOU was not against exchange programs per se (except at the high school level, given how susceptible kids are at that age to "nefarious influences"), but that these need to be directed in a way that meets the country's interests. Rather, he said, than sending students to study humanities in the States, Uzbekistan should be able to send its best and brightest to pursue technical education so that they can contribute to the country's economic development. He also suggested that the Embassy is being duped by candidates who are misrepresenting themselves, then stay in the U.S. and ultimately join the "chorus of rabble-rousers" who bad mouth Uzbekistan from abroad. These people then only aggravate our bilateral relations. Rather than this, he suggested that the GOU provide a pool of eligible students from which the Embassy could then choose the most qualified. Norov admitted that this was mostly off the top of his head, but took the Ambassador's point that it was an important topic that should be discussed as part of the ABC.

Afghanistan

18. (C) Norov showed himself to be very well-briefed on the debates in the U.S. concerning the direction of Afghanistan and the press reports on the contents of General McChrystal's report. He said that the current problems surrounding the election only underscored the wisdom of rekindling the 6 plus 3 model (Afghanistan's neighbors plus NATO, the U.S. and Russia) to discuss the Afghan

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situation. He said that Russia has an important stake in the outcome in Afghanistan, but that it will never consider sending troops, as some have suggested. Never hiding the Uzbek disdain for Afghan President Karzai, Norov said that only the Iranians could rejoice at his "victory" in the elections since, in their view, his incompetence would make things more difficult for the U.S. Afghanistan needs a central authority, but the source of legitimacy is not elections, but religion.

Sanjar Umarov Amnesty

19. (C) Asked by the Ambassador about the status of jailed oppositionist Sanjar Umarov, Norov said that, following Karimov's statement that Umarov would be amnestied, there was "no going back." It was simply a procedural question now - a commission had been formed and was reviewing all the names that would go on the amnesty list. He did not know how long this would take but, when reminded that U/S Burns was interested, said he would look into it. He genuinely seemed to think this was a done deal, just awaiting implementation.

Comment

10. (C) Most of what Norov said is not new, but (faithfully echoing President Karimov) further underscores Uzbekistan's increasingly Asian national orientation. Both politically and economically, the Uzbeks are emulating the models of Korea, Malaysia and other countries where democratic change has been gradual and the state has led top-down, export-oriented economic development policies. Although it is far from clear whether or not the Uzbeks will be able to realize this goal, it has important implications for our own goals. Norov's Brussels meeting was indicative of the problem when he told the press afterwards that "Uzbekistan doesn't need Europe." Although there was a large dose of bluster in this

statement, a consequence of globalization has been that markets and technology are much more diffuse. The Uzbeks seem to have no difficulty finding Asian partners who are perfectly happy to develop economic ties while saying nothing at all about human rights, democracy, religious freedom or child labor.

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